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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KMPI](#) [TS](#)
SUBJECT: DAS CARPENTER'S ROUNDTABLE WITH TUNISIAN CIVIL
SOCIETY

REF: A. 06 TUNIS 2856

[1](#)B. 06 TUNIS 2844
[1](#)C. 06 TUNIS 2688
[1](#)D. 06 TUNIS 2408
[1](#)E. 06 TUNIS 1255
[1](#)F. 06 TUNIS 816
[1](#)G. 05 TUNIS 2100

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for Reasons 1.4 b & d

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) During his January 10-12 visit to Tunis, NEA Deputy Assistant Secretary J. Scott Carpenter met with six leaders of Tunisian civil society. In a wide-ranging two-hour discussion, several common themes emerged:

-- critiques that the United States, rhetoric was falling behind its actions in promoting democracy in the region

-- their difficulty in working with the USG due to pressure from Tunisian society and the perception that the US was continuing to support Tunisian President Ben Ali and other "dictatorships"

-- opposition to US involvement in Iraq and a perception of USG inaction on the Middle East Peace Process (MEPP)
Carpenter reinforced the USG's commitment to the Freedom Agenda, while looking for concrete ways to work with Tunisian civil society to promote shared goals. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (U) Ambassador hosted and moderated a roundtable for NEA DAS Carpenter on January 11 with prominent members of Tunisian civil society including Khelil Zaouia, steering committee member of the Tunisian Human Rights League (LTDH, Ref C), Taieb Baccouche, President, Arab Human Rights Institute (AIHR, Ref G), Mohsen Marzouk, Program Coordinator, Freedom House (Ref E), Lotfi Hajji, President, Tunisian Journalist Syndicate (SJT, Ref C), Mokhtar Jellali, lawyer/activist (Ref F), and Mustapha Ben Jaafar, Secretary General, opposition party Democratic Forum for Labor and Freedoms (FTDL, Ref A). In a wide ranging discussion, several prominent themes emerged, reflected in the headings below:

Strong Stigma in Associating with USG

[1](#)3. (C) DAS Carpenter began the roundtable by thanking the attendees for coming, noting that it was particularly

important and courageous for them to have done so in an environment where contact with the US Embassy draws criticism from other Tunisians (Ref D). This theme was reinforced throughout the roundtable by different interlocutors, who complained of a strong stigma attached to dealing with US officials -- a stigma propagated by both GOT (and GOT-controlled media) and civil society colleagues alike, and made more difficult by the perception that the US had given up on promoting democracy. Ben Jaafar said that this stigma prevented a closer relationship between the USG and democracy activists, as "today we talk with the United States, tomorrow we are labeled as traitors and what for? The US continues to support Ben Ali and other dictatorships."

Tunisian Civil Society Needs USG Political,
Not Financial Support

14. (C) Several interlocutors, responding to a question from Ambassador on concrete ways the USG could support reformers, noted the need for "moral and political" support in an environment where programmatic support was next to impossible. Jellali said that the United States could best support Tunisian civil society by "denouncing (Ben Ali) regime excesses." Jellali emphasized an oft-heard point that Tunisia could be the model for democratic reform in the region. Ben Jaafar added that Tunisia's progressive and moderate traditions, not internal security measures, were the best protection against extremism. Ben Jaafar continued that USG political support should focus on institutional and legal/constitutional reform in Tunisia, particularly on judicial independence. Marzouk, the only representative of an organization currently receiving MEPI funds at the roundtable, recognized the importance of programmatic

efforts, mentioning MEPI initiatives and the Forum for the Future. However, Marzouk emphasized that the USG needs to develop a long-term strategy to address democratic reform. Short-term tools, such as MEPI programs, are an essential part of addressing reform needs in the region, he said, but should be under the umbrella of a long-term strategic approach. Marzouk also pointed out that Tunisian civil society should seek out partnerships with private sector American organizations and individuals, recognizing that not all assistance should come from the USG.

Iraq/Palestine

15. (C) Much of the roundtable was dedicated to Iraq and Palestine, with most invitees describing perceived USG "inaction" on the MEPP, and pointing to Iraq as the immediate reason for the stigma against working with the US. Several interlocutors claimed that problems in Iraq and Palestine were negatively affecting human rights defenders across the region. Taieb Baccouche said that in analyzing the current "catastrophe" in the region, "everything starts from the base of Palestine." Baccouche also lamented that Saddam Hussein, due to the broadcast of the surreptitious video of his execution, had "become a martyr." DAS Carpenter responded that although he regretted the manner in which he was killed, he did not "weep for Saddam." DAS Carpenter and Ambassador also explained USG involvement in the MEPP at length, describing the complexity of the process, and highlighting current challenges, such as the weakness of Abu Mazen and the rise of Hamas.

Not Enough Progress on Freedom Agenda,
Too Much Support for Regime

16. (C) Several invitees focused their remarks on a perceived lack of progress by the USG in promoting democratic reform,

juxtaposed against what they considered continued support for "dictatorships" in the region, and the Ben Ali regime in particular. Lotfi Hajji and Mokhtar Jellali both mentioned having been to similar roundtables with high-level USG visitors in past years, where these officials had "pledged not to support dictators", but that nothing had changed in the interim in terms of either political liberalization in Tunisia or USG support for the GOT. Hajji questioned the utility of discussions with visiting USG officials if these talks provided no forward movement on political freedoms in Tunisia. "We cannot and should not come to the Embassy like the Wailing Wall, simply depositing our concerns and getting nothing in return," remarked Hajji. Marzouk added that the United States should "treat dictators like Cuban cigars: they should be sanctioned and banned."

17. (C) DAS Carpenter closed by reemphasizing that the USG push for democracy in the region was going to continue, despite rumors to the contrary -- rumors that governments in the region were fanning. He continued that even if many in the region viewed our policy and actions as contradictory, it would be hard to imagine that civil society in these countries would want the USG to stop this push for democracy.

Comment

18. (C) Although the tone of the roundtable was, on the Tunisian side, largely pessimistic, invitees expressed afterwards their appreciation for the discussion. Ben Jaafar in particular said that it was the best event he had attended at the Embassy in recent years, positively noting DAS Carpenter's frankness and "passion".

19. (U) DAS Carpenter has cleared this message.

GODEC